

Exile

by BlissfulCacophony

Category: How to Train Your Dragon

Genre: Adventure, Drama

Language: English

Characters: Astrid, Hiccup, Toothless, Valka

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2014-09-11 07:28:17

Updated: 2016-03-03 08:20:56

Packaged: 2016-04-26 21:00:33

Rating: T

Chapters: 9

Words: 19,839

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: When Toothless saves Hiccup from the Monstrous Nightmare in the ring, Stoick doesn't take it well, and exiles Hiccup from the village. Alone with Toothless, Hiccup finds himself relying on the kindness of a mysterious dragon rider in order to survive. Some Astrid X Hiccup here and there. Warnings for gore and distressing content.

1. Disgrace

Hiccup nearly fell over when Stoick tossed him through the front doors of their dark house. He regained his footing, a little sore from being roughly dragged by the back of his vest all the way there, and turned to face the large, dark, imposing form of his father.

"Please, dad." Begged Hiccup, his heart pounding, scared of what his father might do. "They're not what we think they are."

"Not what we think they are?!" Rumbled Stoick.

Hiccup flinched.

"That's what your mother always said, but just look what happened to her."

The mention of his mother was like a knife through Hiccup's heart. Stoick was shaking with rage and red in the face.

Hiccup backed away submissively, trying not to stir his father's anger anymore than necessary. "Just please, don't hurt him," he pleaded. "That dragon, Toothless, is the only real friend I've ever had. If anything were to happen to himâ€œ"

"You named the beast?!" Stoick was apalled. "What do you think it is, Hiccup, some kind of pet? That is a dangerous, bloodthirsty monster.

Maybe you used some tricks to tame it, ride it even, but one day it will turn on you. They can't be trusted."

"Dad, you don't understand." Said Hiccup, trying to stay calm.

"No, you don't understand, son. I can't just let this go unpunished. Tomorrow, you'll come with me, and I'll kill the dragon myself, then we'll forget any of this ever happened. It's clear you were never cut out for dragon fighting, after all."

Hiccup gasped, the idea of having to watch Toothless die putting him on the verge of tears. "No, dad. Don't kill him. I'm begging you."

Stoick slammed him fist against a shield on the wall. "Don't you get it, Hiccup? This is a lesson you are going to have to learn. If you refuse, or even try to stop me, I'll be forced to exile you, and you'll never be accepted in Berk again. I'll have to disown you as my son. Do you really want that?"

Hiccup hesitated.

"Don't be a fool, Hiccup."

Hiccup felt tense through his whole body. "I just have one question." He said, slowly, hanging on to each word. "Will Toothless be able to come with me if I leave?"

"If you wish it." Muttered Stoick, his face emotionless, knowing already what Hiccup would choose.

Hiccup took a deep breath. "Then consider me gone. I'm sure the village will be happy to have me gone anyway."

"Is that your final decision?"

"Yes."

"Then I hereby declare you exiled from Berk. You no longer will be considered a Haddock, or my son. Do you understand that?"

Hiccup hung his head. "Yes, I do."

"Then you have until sunrise to be gone. I'll have Gobber take care of the formalities, and take your dragon out of it's cage before you leave." Without another word, or any goodbye, Stoick left the house, slamming the doors behind him.

Hiccup watched him leave, and fell to his knees, burying his face in his hands.

He didn't see Stoick again as he gathered whatever belongings and provisions he could carry. He sighed as he walked out into the village. It was clear that Stoick had gotten the word out. No one was looking at him. They all turned away as soon as they caught sight of him.

"Hiccup." Said Gobber, putting a hand on Hiccup's shoulder. "Come with me."

Hiccup flinched a little away from his hand, and turned to face the blacksmith. "I'm guessing for the formalities my daâ€" Stoick was talking about?"

Gobber nodded, his expression heavy and somber as he avoided Hiccup's eyes. "It's tradition for an exile to receive some kind of mark to brand them as such. Stoick told me to only let you leave with the dragon if you cooperate."

Hiccup felt his chest tighten up, knowing whatever Gobber was going to do, it was going to hurt a lot, but he took a deep breath. He was going to get out of this looking strong. . .hopefully. "Alright. I'll follow you."

The entrance to the forgery looked foreboding as Hiccup followed Gobber into it. Just the very fact that it was the forgery made Hiccup feel nauseated.

Gobber motioned to a stone shelf, and pushed Hiccup toward it. "Take off your shirt, and kneel next to that shelf. I'll get you something to bite on."

Hiccup nodded, and did what he was told, though "something to bite on" was hardly a comforting concept. He took off his vest, belt, and shirt, exposing his freckled back and chest, before kneeling with his arms on the shelf. His stomach dropped when Gobber reached over and tied his wrists securely to a metal hook on the shelf. He put a piece of hard and bitter leather between Hiccup's teeth.

"I'm sorry about this, Hiccup." Said Gobber.

Hiccup felt he charcoal marks across his back, extending from his shoulders to his waist and all the way across its width. It only kicked up his anxiety, and he flinched when Gobber began replacing the marks with quick, sharp cuts, just deep enough to ensure scars. He bit into the leather and balled his fists until his knuckles were white, digging his fingernails into his palms. Tears streamed from his tightly shut eyes as he struggled to hold still. Squirming would only mess Gobber up, and he wanted this to be over as soon as possible.

He could only imagine what toothless was going through.

"Finished." Said Gobber finally to Hiccup's relief.

At this point Hiccup's whole back stung terribly, and it was all he could do to stay sitting up when Gobber released him and began cleaning and dressing his wounds.

"You can take your clothes with you, but you can't wear them on the way out of the village. Pants and boots only. I'll put what you took off into your basket for you."

Hiccup nodded slowly, his mind clouded by the pain.

Gobber slapped him lightly on the cheek. "Wake yourself up." He said. "You'll be having to saddle and fly your dragon soon. I can't have you hanging around here until you feel better. Sorry, but rules are rules."

"I understand." Muttered Hiccup, and he got up, his mind blank as he tried not to stumble. He had viking blood. He could handle this. He took the basket once Gobber had put his clothes in it, and slung it over his shoulder, ignoring the pain the best he could as they went back to the arena, where Gobber promised Toothless would be waiting.

Toothless was sitting in the middle of the arena, bleeding from the shoulder.

Hiccup turned to Gobber, distressed. "I thought you weren't going to hurt him."

"I didn't. The promise was to let you leave with him, and spare his life. His wound must be Stoick's doing."

Hiccup walked up to Toothless, looking at the Viking helmet and mace carved into the dragon's skin. He hugged Toothless. "We'll get through this, bud." He said softly.

Putting on Toothless's saddle was pure torture, but Hiccup was determined to push through it. All the while Toothless warbled in concern and stared at Hiccup with sad green eyes.

"It's alright, Toothless." Said Hiccup, out of breath as he finished. "I did it."

He rubbed Toothless neck, before hooking the basket to Toothless's saddle, carefully slipping on his own harness, and mounting the black dragon, making sure he was securely hooked into the saddle before riding Toothless out of the arena and taking off. Toothless noticed how out of it Hiccup was, and did the flying himself, gently nudging Hiccup to work the foot pedal, and speeding away from the place they could never again call home.

2. Rescue

The hours passed, and Hiccup could feel himself losing focus by the minute. It was when he nearly fell asleep that Toothless started drifting down to land. They ended up on a small cliff where Toothless helped Hiccup gather wood to burn, and started a small fire. Hiccup found his clothes in the basket and put them on, curling up next to Toothless, his back stinging like crazy.

They were both hungry, but Hiccup knew they had to ration out the food until they were both strong enough to fish, so their dinner was scanty. Storm clouds blew in as dusk arrived, and Hiccup sighed when it began to snow. They had no shelter, and Hiccup was very weak as the temperature plunged. Toothless wrapped Hiccup's small body in his wings, making small, smoldering patches in the ground for warmth. Hiccup was grateful for Toothless's protection, but even the dragon had trouble holding up against the howling winds, and pounding hail.

By morning, Toothless was nearly out of fire, and Hiccup was unconscious.

Not far from them, a figure clad in strange armor rode on the back of a four-winged dragon. They had heard the forlorn cries of a dragon

that night, and figured the poor creature must have gotten caught in the storm, but they were unable to search until the gale blew over. Now they searched, hoping to rescue and gain a new friend. The last thing they expected was to find a frost-covered nightfury curled up in the snow, wearing a saddle.

They landed on the other edge of the overhang, waking Toothless and putting him on the alert. He bared his teeth, and growled at the newcomers, moving his body closer around Hiccup, to hide him and keep him protected. The four-winged dragon backed off, but the rider dismounted. Toothless only growled more fiercely.

"It's okay." Said the rider, taking off her helmet. "I'm here to help you." She held her hand out, and crouched, moving toward Toothless slowly. She gasped when she saw his shoulder. "You poor thing. Who did this to you?"

Toothless folded his ears back and looked at the rider with sad eyes as she approached.

"You must be so scared." She said softly, her hand just inches away from his nose. "I can help you."

Toothless let her touch his nose, but his body was still wrapped protectively around Hiccup.

The rider noticed. "What's that you have there? Don't worry, I won't take it from you."

Toothless warbled sadly, and revealed Hiccup's limp body, ready to protect him if the rider proved hostile.

The rider only looked the boy over. "Is this your rider?"

Toothless warbled.

"The poor boy must be freezing. He's lucky he had you to protect him. . . I can care for him, feed you both, and give you shelter if you'll come with me." She went to pick Hiccup up, and Toothless let her. He deemed her trustworthy as she gently scooped Hiccup into her arms. She paused, taking a moment to examine his face again before looking down at Toothless.

With his tail exposed, she realized that the saddle had more of a purpose than comfort. She examined the apparatus connected to his prosthetic tail fin before giving Hiccup to her dragon to carry. "Take good care of him, Cloud Jumper." She said. "I'll fly the nightfury. It looks like he can't do it on his own." She mounted Toothless, and Cloud Jumper cradled Hiccup in his talons. On the rider's word, they took off, and left the cliff behind them.

0o0o0o0o0

The village was oddly quiet when Astrid woke up. She'd spent much of the night worrying about Hiccup and his dragon, but everything seemed calm. Business was going as usual. The only difference was that Hiccup was nowhere to be found.

"Hey, Astrid." Said Snotlout, catching up to her. "You look

beautifully furious today."

"Where's Hiccup?" Asked Astrid, a million possibilities running through her mind of what could have become of him.

"Didn't anyone tell you? The chief exiled him last night. He left with his dragon before sunrise. Why do you even care about that dragon-loving loser anyway? He was such a weakling, not to mention a cheater and a liar."

"Just curious." Said Astrid, not wanting to let on that she knew Hiccup was right. She had considered telling the village about the dragon nest, but not after this.

"He went right into a blizzard too." Said Tuffnut.

"Yeah, he's probably dead by now." Said Ruffnut casually.

Astrid flinched at the thought of Hiccup freezing to death.

"Dead or not, with him gone, I'm next in line to be chief." Declared Snotlout. "Not that I ever thought he'd get chosen anyway."

Ruffnut and Tuffnut laughed, and the teens walked away, except Fishlegs, who lingered behind with Astrid.

"Are you okay?" He asked.

Astrid nodded, her face blank. "Yeah. I'm fine."

0o0o0o0o0

"Stoick!" Called Gobber, walking after the chief.

"What is it, Gobber?" Asked Stoick seriously.

"Oh, just wondering how you're doing. Exiling your own son is nasty business. I certainly didn't enjoy carving that monstrous nightmare head into the boy's back. Must be such a disgrace. Not to mention he could be already dead. Poor Hiccup. Brought it on himself, didn't he?"

Stoick paused, tensing at the shoulders. "Don't mention that name to me again. He's not my son." he said curtly before walking away.

Gobber sighed. "What a shame. Looks like he misses his boy already."

0o0o0o0o0

Astrid snuck around the village. She had had to wait until nightfall to do this, and now it was her chance. She had to go after Hiccup. He could be dead by now, or dying and unable to get help. The least she could do was help him, but that entailed doing the unthinkable.

She snuck into the dragon arena, looking at the cages holding the dragons they fought with for training.

"Okay." She said, taking a deep breath. "Which one of you should I choose?"

3. Stranger

Hiccup woke up slowly to Toothless breathing in his ear, feeling warm and groggy, the dragon's breath hot against his face. He opened his eyes, though they felt glued shut, and was welcomed by a pounding headache. "Hey bud." He said, his voice weak. "That was some crazy nightmare."

>He was lying on his stomach, and tried to use his heavy limbs to get up, but as soon as he moved, his back shot with pain, making him gasp and bury himself in the pillow, his arms shaking. "Okay." He breathed, digging his fingers into the fabric. "That definitely wasn't a nightmare."<p>

He took some deep breaths, and waited for the pain to calm before cautiously looking up. Wherever they were, it wasn't the same place he had blacked out in. It was a cave, converted into a house, complete with hearth, table, and a bed, but no one was home.

Toothless was curled around him, his shoulder well bandaged, and his saddle missing, but he seemed calm. Somebody must have rescued them while he was out, though he had no idea how long he had been that way or who could possibly have found them.

"Where are we?" He asked aloud, propping himself up slowly on his elbows. "Toothless, help me up."

Toothless seemed to disapprove of the idea, but slipped his head under Hiccup's arms, and helped him sit up. Hiccup gritted his teeth and panted a little once he was upright. At least now he could see his surroundings better, and himself. His whole torso was wrapped in clean

>bandages that went around one shoulder to cover his upper back, but that's all that was on him. No pants, no boots, no clothing at all.<p>

"Well this is just great." He said. "I'm naked and wounded in a stranger's house with no idea where I am. Just what I always wanted."

Toothless huffed beside him, and Hiccup sighed.

"Well you're right about that, bud. We could still be out there freezing to death in the snow. I really owe this person big time, whoever they are."

Just then they heard humming coming from the entrance to the cave. It was a woman's voice, rich and soothing, accompanied by the sound of claws against rock. It wasn't long before the owner of the voice entered the cave, a tall woman followed by a dragon unlike any Hiccup had seen before, with four wings. The woman wore brown leather armor with a fur hood, and walked with her head held high, her long chestnut hair pulled back into three ponytails that were knotted, braided, and twisted individually.

Hiccup hurried to cover himself up with blankets before she looked in his direction.

"Oh you're awake." She said, smiling at him. "Good to see you're sitting up too."

Hiccup felt a little awkward at how casual she was around him, but remembered she may have been caring for him for days. "Well I can't say it was easy. . .or that I did it by myself. Toothless helped me."

She tilted her head, walking over to them. "Toothless? Is that the name of your dragon?"

Hiccup nodded. "Yeah, it is."

"Well it's certainly appropriate. Retractable teeth is a very unique trait." She petted Toothless's nose and he hummed softly.

Hiccup was surprised at Toothless's reaction to her. "Yeah. . .Umm, mind if I ask you some questions? You know, like, who are you anyway? What is this place? How did I get here? How are you so comfortable with my dragon?"

"Slow down." Said the woman, chuckling and taking off her armor. "How about I start by introducing myself. My name is Valka. What's your name?"

"It's Hiccup."

Valka paused briefly before taking off her bracers. "Interesting name. Glad to finally know it. I found you and Toothless on a cliff side covered in snow yesterday morning. You were both very cold, and wounded, so Cloud Jumper and I brought you back here." She motioned to the dragon, who had already settled himself in.

"Wait, so you ride dragons too?" Asked Hiccup in surprise. "I thought I was alone in that."

Valka nodded. "I do, and we're not the only ones out there either, though we're a rare breed, and I like to think I'm different from the rest. You see, this place is what I like to call the Dragon Sanctuary. I've lived among these creatures for fifteen years. It certainly surprised me to find another dragon rider, with a very fresh mark of exile on your back no less."

"So do you live here alone? Well I mean, except for the dragons."

Valka nodded. "Yes. It's just me."

"So you're the one who. . .took my clothes?" Hiccup was feeling awkward again, the wonder of meeting another dragon rider suddenly gone.

Valka chuckled. "Yes, but don't worry. It's nothing I haven't seen before. I'm a mother, after all. In fact, I'm betting I'm old enough to be your mother. I had to check to make sure you weren't frost bitten, and there was blood on your clothes. I just got around to washing your shirt and pants, so you'll have to wait for them to dry."

"Wait, if you're a mother, where are your children?"

Valka finished removing her armor, and went to fill a wooden bowl with water. "Only one child. A son. Let's just say circumstances haven't allowed me to be there for him. He may very well resent me and be some strong viking warrior. His father was chief after all. He'd be fifteen now."

"He's my age then." Said Hiccup, watching as she set the water and a clean rag next to him and went to grab a wooden box full of medical supplies. "I'm also son of a chief. . .or I was anyway, but I'm no warrior, that's for sure. He probably never knew you, since you said you've been here for fifteen years."

Valka nodded sadly. "It's true. As much as I wanted to be there for him, well. . .you could say my opinions on dragons were very unpopular back where I lived, and when Cloud Jumper brought me here, I felt this was where I belonged. I always told myself he'd be better off if I just stayed away so he could grow up like a normal viking child."

Hiccup nodded, studying her closely as she walked toward him and sat behind him with her medical supply box. It was a really strange coincidence that their stories would match up so well. Was it really a coincidence at all? Stoick had never talked about what had become of his mother, but she was supposed to be dead, wasn't she? This woman couldn't possibly be her, could she?

"Hiccup, if you don't mind me asking, what happened to you to earn you this?" She started unwrapping the bandages around his wounds.

Hiccup hesitated, flinching a little at the idea of her hands being so near his back, even if she was being gentle. "Well, have you ever heard of Berk?"

Valka let out a sigh. "Oh yes. I already see where this is going."

Hiccup nodded. "Yeah. Well you see, I grew up not being able to kill dragons like everybody else. One day, I built myself this net launcher, and used it to shoot down a nightfury. I wanted to impress my father, and prove myself, but in the end. . .I just couldn't kill him. I let him go, and he got stuck in a gully and I realized I had injured his tail, so I made friends with him, and I made him a new tail fin, and eventually I learned to ride him. When my dad entered me into dragon training, I used all the tricks I learned from spending time with Toothless instead of brute force, but it kinda turned out badly because I was chosen to kill my first dragon. . .publicly." Hiccup gulped. "I got a friend of mine to meet Toothless and understand, and when I was in the ring, I wanted to show everyone what dragons were really like, but it all went wrong, and Toothless came to save me. Let's just say. . .that didn't go over well with my dad."

"Well that would certainly explain the tail fin and the wonderful craftsmanship on his saddle, and the mark they put on your back." Said Valka as she wetted down the rag and began cleaning Hiccup's cuts. "I know how it feels to be rejected by people who are set in their opinions about dragons, and it seems like you have a way with them naturally. I can't say I can do anything about your village rejecting

you, but if it helps at all, you're welcome to stay here as long as you'd like. I'm sure you'd fit in."

"Thank-you." Said Hiccup, cringing a little as she started cleaning an especially deep cut.

She quickly lightened the pressure. "Oh, sorry. Are you in a lot of pain still?"

Hiccup nodded. "Yeah, but I'll manage. . .what does the mark look like?"

"It seems to be the head of a monstrous nightmare."

"That would make a lot of sense." Said Hiccup, thinking back to the dragon in the arena.

"Well, it will certainly leave an intimidating scar. Should do you well if you choose a vigilante lifestyle. You, on the back of a nightfury, with a scar like that, some muscle tone, leather armor, and a mysterious sounding title to call yourself. No one will mess with you."

Hiccup chuckled. "Sounds like you know from experience."

Valka smiled again. "People don't often bother you when you're surrounded by a band of dragons."

"I can imagine." Hiccup's heard his stomach growl very loudly. "Do you, by any chance, have any food?"

"Oh. Yes, you must be starving. I'll make something for you as soon as I can finish up. I'll warn you, though, I don't often cook for guests."

"I'm sure it can't be that bad."

"Well the dragon's seem to like it." She started dabbing a hot, stinging, herbal paste into each wound, making Hiccup hiss in pain. "I know, it stings, but it will reduce the pain in the long run."

Toothless nuzzled Hiccup gently, concerned.

"See, Toothless is looking after you." Said Valka, as Toothless let Hiccup hugged his head.

"Thanks bud." Said Hiccup, hugging Toothless tighter.

Valka finished, and wrapped up Hiccup's back with clean bandages before standing. "Now lay down, I'll make you something to eat, and get you some water."

"Alright. Thank-you." Muttered Hiccup tiredly before easing himself back down on his stomach under the blankets.

Valka waited until he was safely down before walking over the hearth to cut up some fish to cook. "Do you need anything for the pain?"

"I'd love something." Said Hiccup, closing his eyes as Toothless curled around him.

"I'll make you some tea. The herbs should help."

"Thank-you."

Valka smiled a little. She was glad to help him. In fact, it was her responsibility, seeing as she was sure now that he was her son. She'd known from the moment she picked him up, really. Even if he was much older now, she could never forget her son's face. His name was no coincidence, nor was his past, or the fact that he had a talent with dragons. He was hers through and through, and the fact that he had taken after her all this time hurt worse than anything else.

She finished cutting the fish and started stacking them on wooden sticks to cook, making excuses to herself for why she was keeping this from him.

She thought that perhaps had he been conscious when she found him, she would have told him, but the day and a half he'd been out cold had given her time to reconsider. Would he resent her for staying away? How would she explain herself? She figured he would like the sanctuary, and what she'd been doing, but she could have been in Berk, sticking up for him this whole time. Not to mention he was probably dealing with so much right now anyway.

Worst of all though, she had no idea how to break this to him.

She hummed to herself as she put the tea kettle over the fire, and added the fish beside it. She prepared a tea bag with some pain killing herbs and steeped it in a cup once the water had come to a boil. As she finished preparing their food, she noticed Cloud Jumper settle in near her while Toothless was dedicated to lying beside Hiccup. She dumped half a basket of fish for Cloud Jumper, and brought the rest over for Toothless. She then laid out the food for herself and Hiccup.

"I'm going to help you up again now." She said, and helped Hiccup sit up. "Sorry it's just fish tonight. I'll need to gather and hunt more to keep us both fed. The tea will help with the pain, and I got you some water too." She sat down across from him on the floor, her plate in her lap.

"I don't know how I'll ever repay you for all this." Said Hiccup, taking a sip of the water.

"No need. The company and conversation is enough for me. If you want to earn your keep though, you can cook for me when you're well enough. Perhaps take care of the place when I have to go somewhere."

Hiccup nodded. "I'd be happy to." He sat there awkwardly, examining the woman across from him as he ate the food, which was mediocre at best. For some reason he felt so safe with her, like he would be taken care of and protected as long as he stayed. Because of that, he wanted to stay there, which is why, as nervous as he was, he had to ask the question that had been bothering him this whole time.

"Valka." He started.

"Yes?"

"There's something I've been meaning to ask you."

She looked directly at him with big eyes that seemed nervous and a little scared. "And what is that?"

"That son you keep talking about. . .he's me. . .isn't he?"

Valka hesitated, and then nodded. "Yes, Hiccup, I am your mother."

Hiccup stared at her, feeling tense. "So, why didn't you tell me right off the bat?"

Valka only sighed. "I was afraid you'd be angry at me, or that perhaps with all you're dealing with, it would be too much to handle. Mostly though, I just didn't know how to tell you. You're a very smart boy though. I suppose I should have guessed I couldn't have fooled you for long. I'm sure lying to you made a wonderful first impression."

"No, it's not like that. I mean, I'm not mad at you at all. You may have not been there for me all these years, but you were there when I needed you most, and I can't say I don't approve of all this dragon stuff you've been doing." He smiled a little, though he couldn't say he didn't feel hurt about her being gone for so long.

Valka looked up at him again. "Oh I assure you, you've only seen a fraction of all this. It's truly amazing." She paused. "Hiccup. . .will you stay here with me? I know I hardly deserve this, but you're here now, so I was wondering, will you give me a second chance, and let me be your mother again?"

Hiccup nodded. "Yeah Val â€“ mom. I'd love that."

Valka smiled and hugged him gently, and it felt warmer, and more safe than any hug Hiccup had received before.

4. Search

Hiccup woke up alone in the cave once again. He figured he must have fallen asleep without really thinking about it. I had been easy with how that evening had gone. Valka had fed him, sat and talked to him, helped him into his dry clothes and put him to bed. Hiccup was so . . . curious about her, and for the first time he thought he knew what having a mother was like.

But now she was gone.

A basket of food was next to him. There was a jug of water within reach, and it appeared that she had already tended to his cuts, but she herself was nowhere to be found. There was no sign of her dragon either. Where could she have gone? If anything, it looked like she had given him the means to take care of himself until her return, which would be in who knows how long.

"Valka?" He called for good measure, but there was no answer. "Mom?" He tried again, but sighed when there was silence. He looked at Toothless, hoping maybe the dragon had some sort of answer, but he only tilted his head and warbled innocently. "She could have at least said something." He said, thinking of all the possibilities of why she had left and where she had gone. "But I guess it's just you and me bud." Toothless just laid his head down next to Hiccup, and wrapped his tale around the boy.

Hiccup looked around a little more, hoping to find a note or something, but his suspicions were concerned. She hadn't left a single clue, and it made him feel a little frustrated. He told himself not to worry, and that she'd be back for sure. She had to come back, right? This was her home after all, and why would she rescue him just to abandon him, especially when he was in no condition to fend for himself? As his mother she loved and cared for him enough to come back before the provisions he had ran out . . . right?

He sighed and buried his head in his pillow. He hated not knowing, not quite trusting the woman he had just met, even though she was his mother, but he didn't really have a choice now. All he could do was stay put, and wait.

0o0o0o0o

The dusky air was cold and crisp as Astrid snuck through the village in the same fashion she had for the last two nights. The nearly three days since Hiccup had been exiled had been a series of well . . . failures. She had wanting nothing more than to get the village on Hiccup's side, but the more she tried, the more she realized how hard and sketchy of a thing it was to do. Trying to stop the fighting meant endangering the village to the other Vikings, but they didn't know the truth. They couldn't take in the truth. Still, her Viking stubbornness issues drove her to keep trying, just like their Viking stubbornness kept them fighting her. This was such a problem.

In the end, her efforts, and how secretive she was being, had only earned her name calling and some pretty nasty looks. She was just glad that, unlike Hiccup, she had some status, and the other teens had a reason to be afraid of her. She had also been discreet enough that when she rode off at night to try to find Hiccup on the back of the deadly nadder that she had begun to call Stormfly, no one suspected her. Of course that, like everything else, hadn't been working out either.

She had searched every inch of the island, and all the islands around it in search of Hiccup, but she hadn't had any luck. The only thing she'd found was a pathetic little abandoned campsite buried in melting snow. It made her sad and worried to think he might have frozen to death somewhere in the freak snowstorm, but how could he with Toothless at his side? Though she wasn't ready to give up on the village, she knew she could only search for Hiccup for so long. Tonight, she was going to give it one final shot, and if she came up empty handed, she'd just have to forget about him . . . and move on.

0o0o0o0o

Valka crouched on Cloud Jumper's back, wearing her helmet, looking

out around her for potential trouble as the last light of the sun disappeared under the horizon. She had spent the entire day hunting, and she was pleased to find that she had done it relatively free of trouble, and had had more luck than she expected. Now she was exhausted, over a week's worth of food hanging from Cloud Jumper's talons, and even more in a basket slung across her back.

"Well I think we got a record haul this time, wouldn't you say?" She observed, looking at Cloud Jumper.

He only huffed beneath her.

Valka scoffed and crossed her arms. "Oh, don't be such a pessimist. Soon Hiccup will heal, and we'll teach him how to hunt with Toothless."

Cloud Jumper let out a doubtful growl and flew a little higher.

Valka sighed. "Yes, I know he's a wee little thing, but that doesn't mean anything. You remember what a clumsy oaf I was to start with."

The dragon just huffed again.

"You're just a sourpuss, that's what you are."

Cloud Jumper tensed, and started growling lightly.

"Oh what did I insult you or something?"

The dragon shook his head, and went into a silent glide, still tense and watchful.

Valka became tense too. "What is it, old friend?" She looked around, catching the form of a deadly nadder flying a ways off, seemingly with a rider. This made Valka both curious and suspicious, and she brought her staff into a defensive position. She had a policy concerning other dragon riders because they were a rare occurrence and she didn't often trust them. This was of course to kidnap them in hopes of either gaining a new ally or capturing a crony of Drago's that she could question, and instill fear in before sending them back to Drago with some good bruises and a horror story to tell. Usually, it was the latter.

"Shall we go greet our friend?" She asked, and Cloud Jumper swooped around to intercept the nadder.

Astrid tensed when she heard the sound of another dragon in the distance, and saw it approaching. "Go, Stormfly." She ordered her dragon, and Stormfly sped up, but screeched and paused when she was intercepted by the larger dragon.

Astrid gasped when she saw the dragon's armored rider, getting the feeling that she was getting herself into some serious trouble.

Valka stood up on Cloud Jumper, surprised to see a teenage girl on the dragon's back, and deciding not to scare her further by plucking her from her dragon's back. She pointed her staff at her instead,

standing up straight and intimidating. "Who are you, and what business do you have here?" She demanded, lowering her voice in the way she usually did to mask that she was a woman.

Astrid instinctively reached for her axe, wanting to get out of there before something bad happened and she couldn't get back to Berk in time.

Valka saw this, and held her hand out, motioning for her to stop. "Don't attack us, and we won't harm you in return." She warned, putting her staff down to her side.

Astrid took her hand away from her axe, but didn't relax either. "My name is Astrid Hofferson." She said confidently, trying to sound like she wasn't intimidated. "I am a Viking and I'm just out searching for my friend."

Valka paused. A Viking girl named Astrid? Wasn't Astrid the name of the girl Hiccup had told her about? The girl he liked? The one he had convinced to accept Toothless?

Valka tilted her head. "You mean Hiccup?"

Astrid gasped and her eyes widened. "What?! You mean you know Hiccup?! You know where he is?!" She exclaimed excitedly.

Valka nodded, deciding that she could probably trust this girl. "Yes. Come. I'll take you to him."

Astrid was reluctant, but followed, knowing it was a chance. She looked at the other rider, wanting to know more. She had never met another dragon rider before, but she kept quiet on their flight. Eventually they got to a cave, and Cloud Jumper landed, and Valka slipped off and continued on foot. Astrid decided to follow suit and got off of Stormfly, noticing that the larger dragon was dragging a haul of fresh game with him.

Valka took off her helmet, and Astrid was surprised to see that the rider was a woman with long auburn hair pulled away from her face. She spoke to her dragon like she was having a conversation with him, and other dragons seemed to be drawn to her. They followed her casually, letting her scratch their scales as she went along. This only sparked Astrid's curiosity further, and she couldn't keep her mouth shut any longer.

"So, who are you? And how do you know Hiccup?" She asked.

Valka looked back at her, wondering how much she should tell her. "Well to start off with, my name is Valka, and I'm Hiccup's mother."

Astrid's jaw dropped. "His mother? No way. His mother is dead."

"That's what everyone was led to believe when Cloud Jumper carried me off all those years ago, but go back to Berk and ask Stoick about his wife, and he'll describe me to you, if he even talks about me anymore." She sighed. "I found Hiccup freezing to death in the snow with Toothless trying to protect him. He was wounded so I took him in and fixed him up. I knew he was my son from the start, and I was

surprised to find him with a dragon, because the only reason I stayed away is because I thought he'd be like the rest of the Berkians, fighting the dragons like they're nothing but monsters. He woke up only yesterday evening, and I found out just how wrong I was. He actually mentioned you, and that's why I decided to bring you to him."

Astrid stared at her. She didn't know if she believed her story, but either way it interested her. "Wait. You tried to convince them not to fight the dragons? Did you ever make any headway?"

Valka shook her head. "No. there was no changing their minds. There never will be at this rate, seeing as it's so deeply ingrained in them. They don't realize how lucky they are to have some people among them who think differently and are willing to change."

Astrid looked down and nodded. "Yeah, that's true." She thought back to her own struggle, and though she herself had changed, Valka's words didn't give her much hope for the rest. "But I still want to try, because anything that's worth fighting for shouldn't be given up on."

Valka looked back at her, smiling a little bit. "I admire your determination, Astrid. Just be careful, alright? Being different can often be a dangerous game."

0o0o0o0o

Hiccup laid down on his stomach, rolling his pencil across the floor with his finger, and letting it come back to him. He had been sure to bring his notebook with him the night he was exiled, and was pleased to find it was still dry and intact. His day had been spent being really bored and drawing Cloud Jumper on the notebook's weathered pages. He was a little anxious, because he still hurt everywhere, and he was getting really hungry. Toothless had found some raw fish, but Hiccup wasn't that desperate yet. He just hoped his mother would return soon . . . if she even was his real mother.

He wasn't exactly sure why he doubted her. This just all seemed weird, almost unreal. What were the chances that his mother of all people would find him, and then again, why would she lie? She had told that story before he had given her any information about himself. If it was just a coincidence she would have said so, wouldn't she? He pushed the theory out of his mind. She had described his father perfectly, and knew his name. There was no way she couldn't be his real mom.

There was talking outside, and Hiccup perked up. Had Valka brought someone with her? He recognized the other voice, and gasped a little. That couldn't be . . . Astrid's voice, could it?

"Hiccup!" Exclaimed a worn out looking Astrid once she entered into the room. Valka followed her, a smirk on her face, carrying a basket on her back and her helmet in her arms.

"Astrid?" Asked Hiccup, propping himself up on his elbows and looking at her with a surprised grin on his face. "What are you doing here?"

"I've been looking for you." She smiled a little as she sat down next

to him. "Everyone thinks you died in that snowstorm, but I had to make sure. I was about to give up when your mother found me and brought me here. I'm glad to see she's been taking care of you." She noticed the bandages through the slit at the front of his shirt. "How are you doing?"

Hiccup glanced over at Valka, surprised she had told Astrid that she was his mother right off the bat. "I'm doing okay. I still have a long way to go recovery wise, and my wounds still hurt a lot, but I'll be okay. I just can't do a lot on my own until they heal further. Thanks for coming after me, Astrid. It really means a lot." He spotted the blue nadder that walked in after Cloud Jumper. ". . . Is that the deadly nadder from the arena?"

Astrid nodded, smirking a little sheepishly. "Yeah. I named her Stormfly, and I've been riding her every night since you were exiled trying to find you. No one's been on to me . . . from what I know anyway, but I don't really think they trust me. I've been advocating for the dragons lately after all."

"You've been what?" Asked Hiccup, surprised that she would do that. "Astrid, I just got exiled for that. Don't you think that's a little dangerous, you know, especially so soon after all this drama with Toothless?"

"Hiccup, I have to." Insisted Astrid. "I can't let the whole village continue to be so ignorant and fight dragons for no reason. I saw the nest too. I know what's going on, and we can't just keep going on like this. I know it hasn't been working so well, but I at least need to try."

Hiccup frowned. "Astrid, you're up against three hundred years of Viking stubbornness."

"I know, but you changed my mind, so why can't I change theirs?"

Hiccup looked at the determination in her eyes, and decided not to argue with her. For all he knew, she would have more success than he ever did. "That's true. I hope you can Astrid. Just be safe."

Astrid nodded. "I will be."

Valka scoffed. "It's certainly worth the try, but in the case that you can't, you're always welcome here. I'll even set up a bed for you."

Hiccup sucked in his lips and gave her a look. She wasn't helping him at all. "So where exactly were you all day? You kind of left me here all day to worry and wonder how long you'd be gone, you know, without even a goodbye or any clue of what was going on."

"I left everything you needed, didn't I?" Asked Valka, taking out a knife and rolling up her sleeves as she grabbed a dead rabbit from the pile.

"Well, yeah, but that isn't the point. I would have appreciated it if you had told me, so I wasn't left with all that uncertainty."

Valka paused for a moment, and then realization crossed her face. She

looked down and sighed. "That's right. I'm sorry Hiccup. I guess it's been too long since I've lived with another person. I'm so used to not having anyone to look after that I . . . forgot. I went out to hunt for food for the both of us and I didn't even tell you goodbye. What kind of a mother am I?"

Hiccup noticed that she looked really stressed out all of the sudden, and it occurred to him that she really was trying. She had been out doing something for his benefit. "I-it's okay mom." He said, trying to be reassuring. "I guess I didn't think about that. I really should have. Sorry."

Valka shook her head. "No, it's my fault. I'll do better. I remember your father used to insist I let him know whenever I went somewhere. Always so stiff and protective, he was. I bet he made you do the same thing."

Hiccup tensed a little at the mention of his father, and he looked down at his notebook. "Yeah, but I don't think I did it nearly as much as he would have liked."

Valka chuckled. "Same, but I understand you're in a position when you're very dependent upon me, so I won't go running off without telling you." She smirked. "Not until you're well enough to go running off yourself, that is."

Hiccup decided that the more Valka talked, the more intrigued he was by her, and the more she cooked, the more quickly he wanted to get back up on his feet so he could make them decent meals. Astrid took Valka's invitation to stay for a while, and helped her skin the meat while Hiccup found himself drifting off again. When he woke up again, they were talking like they had hit it off really well, and dinner was ready. The fact that Astrid had helped Valka cook didn't make it taste any better, but he was still glad to have Astrid there. He was convinced he'd never see her again, and the more he thought about it, the more he realized how much he would have missed her.

The three ate and talked until the food was finished up, and Valka helped Hiccup out of his shirt so she could change his bandages. Astrid's face fell when he saw the mark of exile on Hiccup's back, but she didn't say anything. Hiccup was glad for it. That was not a memory he wanted to think back to, even though it threatened to come back every time Valka worked at his wounds. It wasn't just because of the fact that it was a painful experience, though that definitely was a factor, but also because it made him think of his home and the life he had there. Sure it wasn't the best home, nor the best life, but the looming fact that he could never return left an emptiness inside of him that he was convinced neither this cave, nor his mother could fill.

o0o0o0o0

Astrid woke up on the floor, covered halfway by a blanket with a warm body behind her, and an arm draped over her waist. She looked around in confusion, and heard a snore which made her jump and sit up quickly, realizing that the person she'd been sleeping next to was Hiccup. Her cheeks flushed in embarrassment, and she gasped when she saw how light it was outside. She jumped to her feet, waking Hiccup in the process.

"Astrid?" He asked groggily.

"I've gotta go." Said Astrid, pulling on her boots.

"What?" Exclaimed Hiccup, suddenly alert, propping himself up on his elbows.

"I have to get back before the village realizes I went off with Stormfly." Astrid explained.

Hiccup's face dropped. "Oh yeah . . . that's right, but . . . but this won't be the last time I see you, right? You'll come back to visit when you can, won't you?"

Astrid paused, and looked back at Hiccup, before kneeling next to him, and hugging him softly. "Yeah. I'll come back, I promise. Don't worry."

"I'm going to hold you to that." Said Hiccup as Astrid stood and walked over to Stormfly.

"I know you will." She mounted her dragon. "Uhh . . . so I guess I'll see you later then."

Hiccup nodded. "Yeah . . . uhh . . . see you later."

Astrid nodded, and Stormfly started walking out the door with Astrid on her back. Hiccup bit his lip. What was he doing letting her leave like this? What if she didn't keep her promise and he never saw her again? He started to panic, and he really wished he could get up and run after her.

"Wait!" He called out, and Stormfly stopped while Astrid turned around, looking at him. Hiccup was still panicking, and he couldn't really form the words right as his heart pounded in his chest. "Just . . . be careful okay? I don't want anything bad to happen to you."

Astrid's face softened and she dismounted Stormfly. "Don't worry about me, Hiccup. I can take whatever they throw at me. You . . . umm . . . be careful too." She leaned over and gave him a kiss on the cheek, and then she was gone, leaving Hiccup blushing and wishing she would stay.

5. Reinforcements

Astrid came back a few hours before morning, yawning and groggy as she put Stormfly back into her cage. "You be safe, girl." She said as she shut the heavy wooden doors. She sighed, sneaking back home and climbing into her bedroom again through the window. It would be like she never left, hopefully.

She was glad to slide under her covers, finally warm and safe from the cold, biting wind. She worried about Stormfly all alone in that cage, and Hiccup lying injured in that strange cave. At least he had his mother to take care of him, quirky and strange as she was. Exhausted, she fell asleep, dreaming about dragons and mysterious riders.

She managed to sleep for the few hours left until sunrise when there was a heavy knocking on the door. "Huh? What is it?" She grumbled, waking up slowly.

"Chief Stoick is here to see you." Came her mother's stern voice from the other side of the door.

Astrid's heart started pounding. What could chief Stoick want with her? Had he found out about her outings with Stormfly? She got out of bed and hurried to get dressed.

"Coming mom." She said as she slipped her boots on. Her braid was still a mess from sleeping on it when she hurried down the narrow stairs to meet Stoick by the hearth. He stood there, red bearded and imposing, looking down at her. Astrid put on a straight face, forcing her nerves to calm as she avoided looking guilty for anything.

"Astrid." He rumbled. "In wake of the cheating that took place this year, I have decided that you have earned the right to kill the dragon. We will hold the fight tomorrow, and by doing so you will earn your right of passage and become a Viking warrior."

Astrid stared at him for a minute before feigning a look of pride and nodding. "I am honored, sir. I will not disappoint you."

"I know you won't." Said Stoick seriously, and just like that, he was gone.

Astrid bit her lower lip and ran upstairs. She was in huge trouble now.

OoOoOo

"So I heard you get to kill the dragon, Astrid." Said Snotlout smugly, coming up to her. "Are you sure your newfound dragon sympathy won't get in the way?"

"Shut up, Snotlout." Snapped Astrid sharply.

"Hey, I'm just saying, you let Hiccup get to your head, and now it's time to drop that and get back to reality."

"Yeah, I hate to say this Astrid," chimed in Fishlegs, "and I know you and Hiccup were getting close, but Snotlout is right. He's been gone for four days now. Who knows . . . you know, what became of him. Maybe it's time to let go."

"Exactly, see, Fishlelgs knows what I'm talking about."

Astrid sighed, really wanting to shake them off. "You know, maybe you guys are right, maybe I should forget about Hiccup and take this as an honor."

"Exactly." Touted Snotlout.

"But maybe I shouldn't. Maybe we don't understand as much about dragons as we think we do. Maybe Hiccup is right, and we should try an approach better than constantly fighting them."

Ruffnut sighed. "There she goes again."

Tuffnut looked at them all uncertainly. "But you know, maybe she has a point . . ."

"What are you saying, Astrid?" Butted in Snotlout. "You mean you don't want to kill the nightmare?"

Astrid huffed. "You know, I actually don't. Why don't you just go ahead and do it, Snotlout? You're next in line to be chief anyway. You might as well do the honors. As for the rest of you, if you want to help me change everyone's minds, I'll be at the arena at sundown. If not, then I'll do it myself. I don't even care anymore if I get exiled."

Snotlout looked her in surprise as she stormed off. She wanted to convince them, and she knew that she had to try, but she was beginning to think that maybe Valka was right, maybe this was a useless effort after all.

0o0o0o0o

Hiccup watched Valka as she tried to cook again. I was kind of comical, watching this imposing, graceful woman become a klutz upon handling food. She skinned meat like a pro, but she didn't seem to have any feel for how long something should be cooked, or how much butter and salt to use, and she always ended up just enough on one extreme or the other to make it taste really bad. Hiccup himself was a fairly decent cook, though not nearly as good as Gobber, or even his father, on the rare occasions that he had time to cook, and offered to help her once he was better. Until then they just ate a lot of overcooked fish, wild berries, and bread and cheese with the moldy parts carved out.

"Sorry everything is kind of stale. It's been awhile since I've bought any new food. I'll need to take a trip to the pirate island, or loot another trapper ship. Whichever comes first. Pirate island food is better in my opinion." She said, picking up a block of cheese and taking a knife to it to see how far into it the mold went.

"Pirate Island? Trapper ships? You know, you still haven't told me where you went this morning, you know, before the sun was up, or what it is exactly that you do, or what the purpose of all that huge armor is."

She chuckled and scoffed as she put her cut and basted fish on a spit. "Oh that, well that is top secret."

Hiccup looked at her in disbelief, and she just laughed.

"I'm just teasing you. I rescue dragons from dragon trappers who capture them for a man named Drago Bludvist."

"Drago Blood Fist?" Asked Hiccup. "What does he want with so many dragons?"

"He's a mad man. Really has it out for me. He's been attempting to build an army of armored dragons for a very long time."

"What does he need a dragon army for?"

"I wish I knew. Mainly, he wants power. He wants to be feared, and it's probably much bigger than I am. I just hope that if I save as many dragons as possible from him, he'll have no army to do that with. Saving them is also how I earn my keep here. The dragons have come to follow and respect me now."

"It sounds like a dangerous job."

"Oh it's not so bad. I got worse injuries learning to fly bareback on Cloud Jumper than fighting trappers, especially with all the armor. Really absorbs the shock and shields from any weapon they might be using. That's not to say that I haven't been injured, but I've got that Viking resilience and I can patch myself up quite easily now."

Hiccup nodded. "So is that all you've been doing all these years? Saving dragons?"

"Oh no, not at all. I've been traveling all over, learning so much about them, living among them, and becoming one of their own, Hiccup. When you get better, I'll show you all around the sanctuary, and teach you everything I've learned, if you'd like me to of course."

Hiccup smiled excitedly. "Could I even help you save the dragons from this bloody fist guy?"

Valka chuckled. "It's Bludvist, and yes, as long as you let me train you."

He looked at Toothless. "What do you think, bud?"

Toothless looked excited about it and gave hiccup a gummy smile, letting his tongue loll out.

"That would be great, mom." He looked over at the fire, which had started to smoke. "I think the fish is burning though."

Valka looked over at it in alarm and took the spit out of the fire quickly, cringing a little because it was hot. "Oh! Sorry. I'll take this one." She chuckled as she fanned out the smoke. "Maybe I should let you watch the next one."

"Well I did say I'd cook for you." Said Hiccup, chuckling too. "Just another reason to get better quickly."

"Well, if you don't kill over from my cooking first."

They both laughed, and Hiccup was beginning to think he could really get used to this.

0o0o0o0

Fishlegs sat around a fire pit with Ruffnut, Tuffnut, and Snotlout, all of which were wearing tense and conflicted looks.

"So . . . uh, I think Astrid is right, and I'm going to help her." Declared Fishlegs nervously.

"Me too!" Said Tuffnut, standing up.

"Sit down." Scolded Ruffnut, pulling him back into his seat. "You guys are just asking to get exiled yourselves."

"Besides, how can she back down from killing the dragon like that?" Argued Snotlout. "She'll ne labeled as a coward for the rest of her life."

"But what If we all helped her change everyone's minds?" Suggested Fishlegs. "We could end the fighting, and even use the dragons to our advantage. Just imagine what we could do on dragon back."

"Yeah, like blow things up." Said Tuffnut, looking at Ruffnut slyly. "And I know how much you love to blow things up. Just imagine the destruction."

Fishlegs cringed. "Umm, Tuffnut, that's not really what I meant . . ."

"Fine. I'm in." Said Ruffnut, grinning evilly. "But say we do try to change everyone's minds. How would we even start? I mean I know Astrid probably has a plan but-"

"You guys are crazy." Huffed Snotlout. "I, personally, would rather not be exiled."

"Come on." Ebed Fishlegs. "Just imagine, Snotlout, chief of Berk, riding on the back of a monstrous nightmare, the most powerful and feared of the chieftains."

Snotlout looked over at him, his teeth clenched, his face pained, before he finally let out a heavy sigh. "Fine, but if I don't get the nightmare, I'm out."

"Great." Said Fishlegs. "Let's go meet up with Astrid."

6. Trust and Loyalty

Astrid sat near the arena, wondering what to do. Stormfly was in there. The beautiful nadder sentenced to die once dragon training was over. It made Astrid sad. Her precious girl deserved so much better than that.

But was more could she do besides run away? She'd never be able to come back home. She'd be branded as a coward forever and soil the Hofferson family name all the worse. She didn't want that, but could she really do this alone? Could she really change their minds?

"Why the long face?" Came Tuffnut's voice.

Astrid looked up to see Ruffnut, Tuffnut, Fishlegs, and Snotlout standing in front of her. "Come to ridicule me more?"

"As fun as that sounds, no. We came to help you out with your dragon thing." Said Ruffnut, stepping in front of Tuffnut.

Tuffnut pushed in front of her. "I mean you didn't really think we'd

leave you to do this all by yourself did you?"

Astrid looked at them in surprise and then smirked. "Even Snotlout agreed to this?"

Snotlout scoffed and crossed his arms. "I'm just in it for the monstrous nightmare."

She nodded and stood. "Well then, let's go inside the arena. I have a plan."

They all followed her into the ring and watched as she opened all the gates.

"Put your weapons down, everyone, and approach them gently." She said as Stormfly trotted out. "Hey girl." She greeted softly, and held out her hand. Stormfly eyed the others suspiciously, but touched her beak-like nose to Astrid's palm and nuzzled it.

Astrid smiled. "See? She trusts me, so she won't hurt me. In fact she'd protect me. Now you guys try."

Fishlegs nodded and tried first, cautiously approaching the gronkle. "H-hey there big guy." He reached his hand out.

The gronkle sniffed his hand and then touched her nose to it.

Fishlegs smiled nervously. "Hey, that worked!"

"I wanna try!" Shouted Ruffnut, pushing past her brother and coming up to the zippleback. Tuffnut came too, and took the other head. The zippleback responded well to them both, and nuzzled them with his head.

"Your turn, Snotlout." Said Astrid.

Snotlout nodded and took a deep breath, trying to look extra tough as he walked toward the monstrous nightmare. He hesitated in front of the intimidating red dragon, looking a little scared.

"What's wrong, Snotlout?" Jeered Ruffnut. "Too chicken?"

Snotlout frowned. "Of course not! Jorgensens are never chicken." He approached the dragon and held his hand out. The monstrous nightmare touched his nose to it. Snotlout smiled. "Hey, heh, you're not bad at all are you?"

Astrid smiled. "Great. Now we wait with the dragons until morning, then we can really show them the truth about dragons."

0o0o0o0o

As sunrise came, the kids were dozing off with their dragons. Astrid was still awake watching for the crowd to gather, but instead an angry chief Stoick came busting in with a harried Gobber trotting after him. Stoick's face was beet red with rage, and his pure presence startled the dragons. They all growled, waking up the other kids.

Astrid jumped to her feet, going to calm Stormfly. "Settle down, Stormfly. It's okay girl."

"Ah, so your beast has a name too, Astrid?" Growled Stoick.

Astrid stood protectively in front of Stormfly. "Don't you dare hurt her."

"Oh, I won't." Said Stoick. "Not right now at least. I should have you all flogged. Don't you know we're at war?"

Gobber came up to him. "Stoick, don't you think that's a bit drastic? Maybe we should just send them home with a warning, let their parents take care of it."

"Stoick, sir, if you're going to punish anyone, punish me." Insisted Astrid. "It was my idea."

Stoick sighed, looking between the two, and then scowled. "Fine, how about this? You've all failed dragon training! Now go home. I'll see you all next year when you've all had some sense knocked into you."

"But what about the dragons?" Protested Fishlegs, who had already fallen in love with the gronkle.

"They'll all be kept for next year seeing as you all hardly left a scratch on any of them. Now go home, all of you."

There was a chorus of "Yes sir" as they all hurried out.

"Except you, Astrid." Rumbled Stoick.

Astrid stopped, and slowly walked back over to Stoick as Gobber worked on getting all the dragons back into their pens.

Stoick sighed. "Listen, I know you and Hiccup were getting close, but you have to let go of these notions about dragons. No matter how they may seem, at their core they're vicious, wild creatures and they always will be no matter what trickery you use. I just don't want you to get hurt, or for any more shame to come to your family name. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir." Astrid muttered

"Excellent, now I expect to see you in dragon training next year, right back at the top of your class, alright?"

Astrid nodded, not very happy about the idea.

"Good. Now go home, and put an end to this dragon nonsense."

"Yes, Chief Stoick." Said Astrid, and then she ran off.

"Talking about flogging kids are we Stoick?" Asked Gobber. "What would Valka say if she saw all this?"

Stoick sighed. "Valka is long dead, Gobber. Don't bring her into this."

Gobber frowned and Stoick looked at him sadly.

"Fine, Gobber, if she were here right now, she'd be disappointed in me. She'd even agree with Astrid, but what did all that time trying to find peace with the dragons do for her? It killed her. That dragon almost killed myself and Hiccup as well. I'll never let that happen again." He walked away, knowing that his wife would never forgive him for exiling Hiccup, and he couldn't face that. A chief was expected to do hard things to protect his people, but now he was alone, and his beautiful family was lost, and it was all his fault.

OoOoOoOo

"So," Started Astrid as she sat down with the other kids in the mead hall the next day. "I know that didn't go so great, but I think I have a new plan."

They all saw her sit down, and stood up with their food in response.

Snotlout looked at her, a large bruise on his cheek. "Sorry Astrid. We're at war. We can't play this little game with you anymore. You're just turning into Hiccup."

"Yeah, sorry Astrid." Said Tuffnut, and they all went to a different table.

Ruffnut scoffed. "If she loved Hiccup and his dragons so much, why doesn't she just run after him?" They all laughed as they sat.

Fishlegs frowned at Astrid, hesitating to leave. "If you want to still try, I mean my mom would be really mad, but I can help. Anything for Meatlug."

"Meatlug?"

"Yeah the gronkle. We uh. . . really bonded."

Astrid sighed. "I don't know, Fishlegs. They're probably right. I should let this go. Besides, I wouldn't want you to get in trouble." And it was in that moment that Astrid knew that Valka was right, and that she couldn't stay.

OoOoOoOo

The trapper ship had been sailing for nearly a week now, following the trail of what they all had agreed was a rare night fury they had all sworn they'd seen. That had been a strange morning, for they could all claim they'd seen the mysterious dragon rider on the beast's back gliding through the misty morning air like a pair of silhouetted ghosts patrolling the land. They'd searched, and everything led them back to the monolithic ice mountain they all knew at the rider's nest. They had been watching, hiding, plotting, and it was finally time they made their move. They would get into the nest, and take the dragon for themselves.

"Alright, lads." Said their young captain as he paced the ship, his black hair tied back into a ponytail. He was a fresh new captain,

only seventeen and already favored by Drago and respected by his crew members. "Today is the day we do what no trapper has done before, and bring a night fury back for Drago."

"But what about the dragon thief, Eret, sir?" Asked one of the crew members.

"That will be a mission for another time." Said Eret. "For now, we need a diversion for them. Carr," He pointed to one of the crew members and tossed a flare torch at him. "You will distract the dragon thief, and once everything is clear, you'll light this and give the signal, and we'll go after the night fury."

"Yes sir." Said Carr, his face calm and solid.

"Good, let's take the boat to shore then, lads."

0o0o0o0o

Valka sat on the floor of the cave, sewing Hiccup a new shirt with one of the small needles, the scissors, thread, and some crimson fabric she had traded for a while back. She looked over at Hiccup and saw him peacefully sleeping on his stomach, his pencil still in hand. They had decided not to go through the trouble of slipping Hiccup's old stained shirt on and off every time she needed to change his bandages, so they could be clearly seen wrapped all down his back and over one shoulder. She smiled a little. He kept looking more and more relaxed in his sleep, and his wounds were already mending well. She would be able to show him the sanctuary soon.

Toothless was pacing around the cave, looking a little restless and trapped. Valka had expected this would happen eventually. As much as dragons loved to nest in caves, they would get quickly restless if they weren't able to easily get out and fly. Toothless had refuse to leave Hiccup's side, but it looked like it was finally time to take him out to stretch his wings.

"Hey Toothless, do you want to come with Cloud Jumper and I today?"

Toothless warbled and looked at Hiccup.

"Oh, he'll be alright. This place is safe, and we won't be long."

Toothless perked up and wagged his whole body in excitement.

Valka smiled, putting down her sewing and picking up her brown breastplate. "Good. I'll put my armor on, and then we can go."

0o0o0o0o

Hiccup woke up to the sound of shuffling footsteps outside the cave. He opened his eyes slowly and looked around, but as far as he could tell he was alone. He noticed the unfinished sewing project lying on the floor, and Toothless's saddle gathered up in the corner. "Mom?" He yawned. He looked at the spot that Toothless usually claimed for himself. "Toothless?" They had obviously gone somewhere, yet again, without telling him. He sighed and was about to go back to sleep when

a stocky man dressed in furs stepped in, a knife clutched in his hand.

He looked at the man in shock, and quickly tried to get himself up, but his cuts pulled and stung and he fell right back on his face.

"Fuck." He swore, his mind generating a slurry of scenarios of how in Thor's name he was going to weasel his way out of this in his condition. He tried to get up again on his shaky arms, but then a hand gripped his hair and pulled and he knew he was done for.

"Don't even try to run, kid." Said the man. "You're going to tell me where the dragon rider is."

0o0o0o0o

Valka smiled as she watched Toothless play with the other dragons in the sanctuary. He kept exploring and bothering Cloud Jumper, who just looked annoyed at him. Valka chuckled at their interactions. Cloud Jumper was an old dragon, even older than Stoick, and preferred to be left alone looking noble and composed. On the other hand, Toothless was young, the same age as Hiccup, and found joy in rubbing himself against Cloud Jumper and hiding under his wings.

They were very peaceful, but then Toothless looked up suddenly and started growling deeply. The other dragons backed away in alarm, but Toothless just kept up the low rolling growl.

Valka came up to him, concerned. "Toothless, what's the matter?"

Toothless looked worried, and turned his attention to the direction of Valka's cave.

Valka's eyes widened and her heart sped up as she thought of the possibilities. Had some danger somehow gotten into her cave? She gasped. "Hiccup." She ran over to Cloud Jumper and got on his back. "Come, let's hurry."

0o0o0o0o

Hiccup cringed as he was shoved up against the wall of the cave, the man's hand around his throat. He had been asking him repeatedly about the dragon thief, but Hiccup hadn't said a word. He didn't dare, for it was his only defense since he knew he was too weak to fight back. A wheat stalk of a kid like him was already no match for this guy. Injured, he was helpless.

The man had become increasingly irritated with Hiccup, beating him and scowling in frustration when Hiccup just took it and kept his silence. "I'll give you one last chance, kid." He growled, poking Hiccup's stomach with his knife. "No more fooling around. Give me the information I need, or I'llâ€"

He was cut off when a hand came out of nowhere and pulled him roughly back, throwing him to the ground. Hiccup stared at the person who had come to his rescue in shock as he fell to his hands and knees. They hardly looked human, wearing bulky armor and a strangely crafted helmet to hide their face. In their hands they held a staff. A familiar staff. Wasn't that his mother's staff? Upon closer inspection he recognized the armor too. He swore he had seen it lying

around the cave. Could this person really be his mother? Could this be the persona she put on when fighting Drago Bludvist?

The armored person held the staff up intimidatingly as the man got to his feet. Her movements were slow and measured as she advanced toward him, crouched over and threatening. He pulled out a sword and attacked at her, only to be blocked again and again by her staff.

"You're not half bad dragon rider." He said with a grin as he quickly pulled something out of his bag and pushed it to one of the cave's outside entrances. "But you'll have to do better than that." He kicked her fast and hard, knocking her down and hurrying over to the flare torch he'd gotten out.

"Oh no you don't." Growled the rider as she got back to her feet. She ran over to him, and struck him violently with her staff, forcing him to focus on her and fight her back. "I don't care what you're planning, nobody walks into my sanctuary, invades my cave, and hurts that boy without going back to Drago with a horror story to tell." They fought back and forth, anger driving the dragon rider's every move until she put down one hard blow, and there was a sickening crack that made chills run up Hiccup's spine. The trapper fell to the floor, his body limp.

The rider gasped, and pulled off her helmet, revealing that she was indeed Valka. "Oh shit." She cursed as she knelt down next to the trapper's body and rolled him over on his back. She pounded her palms quickly into the trapper's chest, and put her mouth over his, blowing air into him, trying to revive him. She tried this a few times, checking his heartbeat repeatedly before giving up. It was no use. The trapper was dead.

"Dammit." She cursed again, pounding her fist into the ground. She stood and put her helmet back on, hefting the body onto Cloud Jumper. "I'll be back."

Hiccup looked at her, dumbfounded. "W-wait! Where are you going?"

"To take care of the body." She said simply, and then she was gone.

Hiccup could barely comprehend what had just happened. He just sat there, staring until Toothless came bounding in, whimpering worriedly and licking him all over. Hiccup let out a hollow chuckle. "H-hey there bud. Hey, I-it's okay. I'm okay, just a few bruises." He wiped the slobber off him. "Ew. Gross, bud."

Toothless offered his head as a crutch to help Hiccup back to his mat, and grabbed the blanket gently with his mouth to tuck him in the best a dragon could. He then plopped down next to Hiccup, and wrapped his body protectively around the boy. Hiccup felt safe and comfortable against Toothless, even with the constant worried noises and licks. The dragon's body was just so warm, and Hiccup could feel his breath, slow, and steady, and strong, like the drums they'd play during bon fires on Berk. Like his dad's breathing. The thought of home brought tears to his eyes. He knew he could never have that again.

He was drifting off to sleep when Valka returned, carrying a blood stained knife, her palms colored the same way. Hiccup looked up as she washed it away under the clear stream of water that drizzled down from the cave's ceiling. She had taken her helmet off, and she looked tired, her features solemn and hardened.

"So you really killed him then?" Asked Hiccup cautiously.

Valka sighed. "Yes, I killed him."

"B-but you didn't mean to right? I mean it was an accident, wasn't it?"

Valka nodded again as she took her armor off.

"And you're just gonna shake it off like nothing happened."

"What can I do Hiccup? It wasn't my intention to kill him and I feel horrible about it, but this is war, and war doesn't come without casualties. There's no use beating myself up over one time when I went a little too far. Besides, he was a trapper and he would have done much worse than hurt you if I hadn't stepped in." She held up the torch.

"A torch?"

"Not just any torch. A flare infused with explosive powder to create a signal. I'm guessing he was planning on signaling for some friends once he got me out of the way to do who knows what. Probably come after Toothless, knowing them. Don't worry though, they won't be coming near here once they see what I left for them."

"Mom . . . what did you do?"

"I just left a warning message for them. That should prevent anymore unnecessary violence for now."

Hiccup shook his head. "Sorry, I'm just having a hard time taking all this in."

Valka frowned, and then came over and sat next to him, sighing. "I know. I'm sorry you had to go through all that. It's my fault. I shouldn't have left you alone. Toothless was just restless and I guess this place isn't as safe as I thought it was." She ran a hand through her hair. "Hopefully we won't have to deal with that again, and I'll be more careful from now on."

Hiccup nodded, frowning. "Yeah . . . Uh, thanks for saving me mom. I'm pretty weak and I'd probably be dead ten times over if it weren't for you."

She nodded and got up. "You're welcome Hiccup, and again, sorry about that. I think I'm going to make myself some tea to calm my nerves, or maybe just some strong mead. Mead is probably a better idea. Would you like something too?"

"No, it's okay. Thanks though." He closed his eyes, and snuggled into Toothless again. He wanted to trust her, and he liked to think that he could, that she was good and fighting for the right thing, but there was a part of him that told him to be wary. He had seen how

strong she was, how hard and precise her movements were, how her body language was totally different when she was in that armor. She hadn't meant to seriously injure or kill anyone, but something told him that she was dangerous, and that this was all a lot bigger than she was telling him.

7. Stories

Hiccup woke up feeling more sore than ever. The punches from the trapper the day before had really done him in, and now all he could really do was lie next to Toothless's warm, smooth body, and try to work through the pain. He noticed Valka sitting on the floor, working again on his new tunic, and leaning against Cloud Jumper lazily. He was watching her, following the movement of her needle with his large eyes.

"Mom?" Asked Hiccup, but his voice came out as more of a croak. She looked over at him. "Oh, good morning Hiccup." She got up and knelt next to him. "How are you feeling?"

"Kind of awful actually. I mean usually when I get attacked, I just land a couple punches and they're down no problem, but y'know, injuries and all that. I got pretty beat up."

Valka smirked. "Oh yes, my Ex Viking warrior, I'm sure you did. I'm sorry I didn't get there sooner."

Hiccup shrugged, still trying to forget the horrible crack as his mother ended that trapper in one hit. "It's okay. You still came. There's no way you could have known I'd get in trouble like that."

She nodded. "That's true. Now let's get you all patched up, shall we?"

Hiccup nodded. "Yeah, that would be best."

Valka inspected the bandages around his torso, noticing that there were blood spots again. The whole experience must have opened some of the cuts up again. They were also soaked with thick, slimy drama saliva, and Hiccup's hair was much the same. Valka glanced over at Toothless curiously before removing the bandages, only to find the wounds scabbed over once again and the inflammation reduced considerably.

"Hmm, that's interesting." Mused Valka, as she picked up a rag, ready to clean the saliva away.

"What's interesting?" Asked Hiccup just before Toothless pushed Valka aside and started licking his wounds. "Ahh! Ow, bud that stings!"

Valka stared at Toothless in wonder. "It looks like his saliva brought all the inflammation down, and helped the blood clot. I think he's trying to heal you."

"You really think his saliva can do that?" Asked Hiccup, feeling the pained heat melt away off his back, replaced by a cool, soothing sensation. Toothlessss manhandled him a little, trying to get all the

cuts and bruises, and Hiccup just let him, trusting his dragon over anyone at this point.

"Yes, I really think so." Valka smiled a little. "This is good news. The sooner you're up again, the better. I'll dress your wounds again once he's finished."

Toothless finished, and Hiccup let Valka sit him up and do her usual routine on his injuries. The saliva directly on his skin delivered the biggest relief. His back finally felt something other than perpetual stinging. On the other hand, his mother's enthusiasm faded quickly. After yesterday's drama, he couldn't blame her. She looked so tired, like she hadn't even slept since then.

He realized in that moment that he knew very little about the woman working at his wounds. She was his mother. She had saved him, and she was some sort of hermit vigilante dragon queen who spent her days living in a cave away from all other people. Yet, she was also the woman his father vaguely mentioned sometimes, a person he had only known throughout his life from vague anecdotes and offhanded references. She had supposedly been eaten by dragons, but that obviously wasn't what had happened at all.

"Uhh, mom?" He asked as she dabbed the sticky dragon drool off of his face and neck.

"Yes, Hiccup?"

"I realized, I mean, I don't know very much about you. I mean, my dad never talked about you, really. Your name didn't even sound familiar until I started realizing who you were. I remember being so worried that I'd forget you completely, so I was wondering if you could, if you wanted to, if you could, I mean, if you wouldâ€""

"Tell you a little more about myself?" offered Valka, helping him back down onto his stomach.

"Yeah exactly, and about Berk, and my dad, and Gobber, and everyone in the village and how you fit into all of it."

Valka chuckled. "Oh, well this should be interesting. You see, I've known Gobber longer than Stoick has. My mother used to ask him to watch me when I was young so I wouldn't go off wandering in the woods by myself. Instead he'd take me troll hunting, and since I wasn't alone, your grandmother couldn't have a fit over it. Really, I enjoyed going on outings with Gobber, and I didn't disobey my mother, that is, until I took an interest in dragons. I didn't want Gobber to hurt them or scare them away, so I would sneak out on my own, not to engage them, but just to watch them, and when I didn't bother them, they wouldn't bother me.

I spent a lot of my time with them until my mother signed me up for dragon training, and your father was the teacher. He was already chief at this time, seeing as he is ten years my senior, and talking to him was so abrasive, that you'd be better off rubbing yourself down with sea salt than trying to carry on a conversation with him. Of course, that was mainly displaced anger from his former best friend, from whom he was once inseparable, betraying him and becoming the infamous Alvin the Treacherous. He flunked me two years in a row, because back then I was clumsier than a baby yak getting on its legs

for the first time, and my best fighting skills were being strong willed, and having an arm good enough to punch village boys in the gut. There was also the fact that I was more interesting in looking at dragons than I was in fighting them, and I think that hindered me the most."

"Well at least you could punch people." Retorted Hiccup. "My best battle skills only include sarcasm and quietly slipping away from the group when no one's looking."

Valka chuckled. "Now don't say that. With your mechanic skill, you don't need raw physical power. Besides, you have me to help you. You get strong quickly out here."

Hiccup nodded. "That's good to know. Now, if my dad was your dragon training teacher, and you weren't the finest fighter in the village, then how did you two end up married?"

Valka smiled a little. "That's the good part. Your father was so bitter. All work, no play, and you could tell it was wearing down on him. One day, I sluffed dragon training for the third time that week, and he followed me, angry that I had the nerve to skip his class like it was no big deal. When I noticed, I panicked and climbed a tree in hope that he couldn't get to me, but he's more limber than he looks, and he scaled the tree right after me. He got to where I was, and I wrestled him out of the tree, using him as a landing cushion. I got right back up and tried to make a break for it, but he caught my ankle and I fell over, so I just sat on his chest and punched him until his nose bled, trying to get him to release me. Finally, I took a knee to his nether regions and he let me go, and that's how I, the awkward social outcast, defeated chief Stoick the Vast. Of course I never let him live it down, and he had to walk back into the village with a bloody nose, and a black eye, but he wasn't even mad. In fact, he seemed very . . . impressed.

He offered to give me personal lessons after that, and even though it was hard, I went because I got to see him soften up. We laughed together, and we worked together well. I found myself wanted nothing more than to see the jolly smile on his face. I finished dragon training, and actually passed that year. Not long after, he asked me to marry him, and in the autumn before my eighteenth birthday, I became the chief's young and mildly eccentric wife."

She sighed, pausing her stitching and looking down sadly at the faded red fabric. "Our marriage was far from perfect. While we made a good team, we were both stubborn, and butted heads often. I was adventurous and always running off. Stoick was overprotective and treated me like a child. He would fight any man who got too close to me. That's how he officially met Gobber actually. He, of course, was all about killing dragons, and I was about saving them. We argued often, and it was loud, and heated, but if anything it rarely got physical.

Still, I don't want you to think our marriage was all bad. We had a lot of good times together. We'd explore, and go to bonfires together. Every Snoggletog we'd snuggle up by the fire with a blanket around our shoulders and drink warm cider and talk until we fell asleep. I had a difficult time getting pregnant, and when I did, the pregnancy was tough, but Stoick was always by my side, even when I had to stay in bed to try to keep you in just a little bit longer.

You came so early, and you were so small, so frail for this harsh world, but your father always believed in you. Of course, he had a baby sized axe forged so you could start training from birth, which I heavily rejected, so maybe he was a bit too enthusiastic, but that was okay. He tried to protect us both the day Cloud Jumper carried me away. I tried to protect you, but he was so gentle and curious, that I simply couldn't hurt him.

Living here has been an adventure. I wanted to go back at first, but I knew Berk couldn't change. I felt you'd be better off without me, and besides, I had found purpose in saving dragons from Drago. I truly believe this is where we belong, Hiccup."

"Mmm hmm." Hummed Hiccup, falling asleep to the story, only to lift his head up when he heard footsteps outside the cave.

Valka heard then too and slipped her armor on with ease. "I'll go check it out." She picked up her staff and headed to the cave entrance. Toothless put his wing over Hiccup.

Valka crept through the tunnel, only to see Astrid walking with Stormfly. She stopped and removed her helmet immediately. "Well, well. Here to pay Hiccup a visit?"

Astrid sighed. "No. Well, not exactly. You were right about Berk. I was wondering if I could stay here with you and Hiccup."

Valka nodded. "Yes, of course. I'm really sorry things didn't work out."

They walked back as Valka shed her armor.

Hiccup was surprised to see that their intruder was actually only Astrid. "I take it you weren't successful?"

"Yeah, Stoick shut us down."

Hiccup frowned. "Sadly, I'm not surprised."

"Me neither." She sighed, and looked at him. "Was your face that bruised last time?"

"No, we had a bit of an intruder problem, but my mom took care of it."

"Yes. It wasn't all that bad." Said Valka, a little tense. "Now why don't I get you both some food? We can figure sleeping arrangements after."

0o0o0o0o

The trapper ship had waited for hours for the signal before they decided to approach the shore and spotted the gruesome sight. There lie Carr, the man they had sent to take care of the Dragon Rider, lying dead on the beach in a pool of his own blood. Behind him, in the same blood was written a warning message in Viking runes: "KEEP OUT."

The chilling message and the brine soaked corpse were enough to send the trappers back to their master. They wrapped up the corpse, and

went to inform Drago Bludvist of the Dragon Rider's latest bold move. Of course they knew punishment was waiting if they returned empty handed, but this was big news, and could easily cover their failure. The Dragon Rider never killed, much less cut victims so they could smear messages on the stone with their blood.

When they came to Drago's hideout, it was Eret that carried the bundle corpse to Drago, and dropped it at his feet.

"What's this?" Growled Drago sternly.

Eret didn't flinch. "My men and I spotted the rare sight of what could only be a night fury a few days ago, so we followed it back to the Dragon Rider's nest. In preparation to infiltrate it, we sent Carr in as our scout, but we never received a signal, and we found him dead on the shore the next morning, with a warning message written on the shore behind him in his own blood. We can only assume he was killed by the Dragon Rider."

By then everyone's interest had been caught, including Drago's.

He smirked, his crooked face contorting with satisfaction. "It's been a long time since the Dragon Rider has killed, and now for such a secret as a night fury. Capture the Dragon Rider! Bring them to me, and then they will lead us to the night fury before we put them out of their misery."

8. Sanctuary

"Alright, Hiccup, let's try this again." Said Astrid as she helped Hiccup sit up.

Ever since Toothless had begun licking Hiccup's wounds, they had finally started healing up. The swelling had gone down significantly, and they had begun to close, but that didn't change the violent scars that remained. Hiccup was glad he couldn't see them. They only reminded him of his father, and what a mess had resulted from all this.

Astrid had been a huge help in Hiccup's recovery. She took on the duty of tending to hiccup and watching him while Valka was gone, and Valka was gone often. She was always out doing whatever it was exactly that she did, and she'd always return with bruises. Recently, she'd come back with a nasty slice on her side, but she still went out. Hiccup had begun to take it a little personally.

"You ready?" Asked Astrid, pulling Hiccup away from his thoughts.

Hiccup nodded, and Astrid helped him up to his feet. He was a little unsteady at first, but once he gained his footing again, he was alright and standing by himself. He still felt weak, and he was still sore, but he was managing. He was careful not to twist too much so as not to aggravate his back.

Astrid grinned. "Great. Looks like you'll be back to normal in no time."

Hiccup shrugged. "Yeah, I guess so."

Astrid's smile dropped. "What's wrong?"

"What? It's nothing. I'm fine, Astrid."

"Are you sure?"

Hiccup sighed. "Okay, maybe I'm not fine. Ever since you came here my mom has always been running off. It's like the minute she didn't have to watch or take care of me, there was nothing to keep her here. I'm beginning to wonder if she ever cares."

"I'm sure she does." Reassured Astrid. "Have you tried talking to her about this?"

"No." Hiccup mumbled, looking at his feet. "I mean, I'm always asleep when she comes back."

"Well, I'll just wake you up when she gets back so the two of you can talk."

"No, Astrid. It's okay."

"It's not, Hiccup. Communication is important. I mean, how are you supposed to know if you never ask? How is she supposed to know if you don't tell her?"

"I dunno . . . what if she doesn't want to talk?"

"You never know unless you try. Give her a chance."

Hiccup didn't look very convinced. "Okay, fine." He carefully sat down, not very happy about the idea of confronting one of his parents.

Astrid made them dinner that night, and Hiccup was asleep by the time Valka returned.

"Hello." Greeted Astrid as Valka walked in and slipped off her armor.

"Hello." Greeted Valka in return. "How is Hiccup doing?"

"He's doing better. I got him up on his feet today."

Valka smiled a little. "Oh, that's wonderful. Maybe I can take you both to the sanctuary and the hot springs tomorrow if he's up to it."

"Yeah. Maybe you should wake him up and ask him yourself . . . He misses you."

Valka frowned a little. "Yes, that would be a good idea. I feel bad for being gone so much. We hardly see each other." She knelt next to Hiccup. "Hey, Hiccup." She nudged him gently. "Hiccup, wake up."

Hiccup opened his eyes slowly. "Mom?"

Valka put on a small smile. "Hey. How are you doing?"

Hiccup yawned. "I'm okay."

"That's good. Astrid told me you stood up."

"Yeah, I did."

"I'm very glad. Tomorrow, if you're up to it, I can take you and Astrid to see some more things in the sanctuary. I think you'd really like it."

Hiccup nodded. "Yeah, I think I would . . . um, mom?"

"Yes?"

"You sure are gone a lot."

Valka sighed. "I know. Things have been crazy out there with the trappers and all."

"I just . . ." He sighed. "It seems like ever since Astrid got here, you've been gone. It's like you don't even want to see me."

"Oh, Hiccup. Of course I want to see you. I just also want to protect you. I guess it just scared me when that trapper got in. I don't want to lose you, Hiccup. You're the most important person in the world to me."

Hiccup stared at her, speechless. Nobody, not even his father had said something like that to him. He wasn't sure what to say, so he wrapped his arms around her, glad when she responded by pulling him close. He hadn't realized how much he needed this.

"I love you, Hiccup." Said Valka.

"I love you too, mom." Said Hiccup. "Getting out of the cave tomorrow sounds nice."

"Good. You'll love it, I promise. I'll spend the whole day with you two. Now you better get some rest, and build up your energy for tomorrow."

Hiccup nodded, looking behind him to make sure Toothless was still sleeping next to him. "You're right. Goodnight, mom."

"Goodnight, Hiccup."

0o0o0o0o

Hiccup woke up in the morning to the smell of burnt fish. Valka was probably cooking again. Hiccup couldn't wait until he was strong enough to take over cooking duty. He thought that perhaps Astrid would be a decent cook, or at least better than his mother, but so far he had been proven wrong.

Toothless noticed that hiccup was awake and began immediately licking his hair. Usually, hiccup could protest, but this had become kind of a normal thing. Toothless had become very protective, attentive, and caring. There was really no arguing with him.

Valka came over, carrying the charred breakfast with her. "Well, good to see you both up and going about business as usual."

"Yeah, unfortunately." Groaned Hiccup, wiping the dragon saliva from his face.

Valka chuckled, picked up a rag, and helped him. "Well, here's breakfast for you. We'll leave as soon as you're ready."

"Thanks, mom." Said Hiccup, and once he was dried off, he ate the fish despite the taste.

After that, Valka helped Hiccup into the tunic she had finished for him and his vest before putting him on Toothless's back.

"It's sort of a hike to the sanctuary from here." She explained.
"It's probably best to let Toothless carry you."

"Of course." Said Hiccup, looking sadly at the scars on Toothless's shoulder. They were both marked as exiles, but Toothless didn't seem to be bothered by it. He loved it here. Hiccup liked it here too. He just wished his head would stop calling his thoughts back to Berk.

They started off, and Hiccup watched as his mother moved fluidly through the caves, navigating them with ease. The rock formations were so strange, geometric, and the rest of the caves were built up with ice. Soon, they went through an entrance that opened up to a large cavernous area filled with dragons flying together in a loop around a rock column at the center of the vast, open area. All around them hung greenery of all kinds, and in the middle of it all, a giant white dragon larger than any dragon Hiccup had ever seen before rested peacefully.

Valka wasted no time in explaining. Hiccup felt like he could sit there forever on the mossy ground just listening to her talk about the Bewilderbeast, the sanctuary, her role as protector, her adventures, and her knowledge. The dragons flocked to her, and she spoke to them gently as scratched their scales in all the right places. Some tried to investigate Toothless, which he didn't appreciate, and others sat with Hiccup and Astrid just to listen to Valka's voice. Stormfly eagerly went to play with the other dragons, and terrible terrors seated themselves on Astrid's head and shoulders and lap.

Hiccup was fascinated. Never before had he seen so many dragons in one place, nor a person so in their element. The dragons trusted Valka without a second thought. In fact, they seemed eager for her attention, and Cloud Jumper would get jealous and growl at them, before promptly tripping Valka in the middle of her pacing. She didn't mind rough housing with them, and they bit at her thick bracers and poked her with their claws, but they understood that she wasn't as strong as they were, and they were very gentle.

They stayed in the sanctuary late into the afternoon and then Valka led them down to the natural hot springs, blue pools inlaid in flat, smooth stone, full of clean water warmed naturally by the earth.

"Not all of these are safe." Warned Valka. "Outside, where there's a lot of foul smelling smoke, there are springs so hot they could peel

off your skin. The dragons love to soak in those. Toothless and Stormfly might like them . . . just don't follow them in."

"You sound like you have personal experience." Commented Astrid.

"Well not really, but I have witnessed some rather unfortunate incidents. Wild dragons

sometimes use those pools to hunt."

Hiccup and Astrid both cringed.

Valka stopped in front of one of the larger pools. "Now the ones inside this cave are perfectly safe." She started taking off her armor. "I bathe here all the time. They definitely make for warmer bath than anything you could do on Berk. I think taking a dip would do us all some good, especially you, Hiccup." She stripped down until she was only wearing a loose-fitting sleeveless tunic and shorts, showing the battle scars on her long, muscular, slender arms and legs. Hiccup and Astrid followed suit as she sat at the edge of the pool, undoing her braids.

Toothless got in first, followed by Stormfly who bounded in happily and splashed Toothless with her nose. Toothless splashed her back, and then Cloud Jumper splashed them both with his tail, curled up lazily at the edge of the pool. Valka chuckled and slipped into the water herself. Astrid helped Hiccup in, and relief washed over his back as it was submersed in the warm water. Astrid smiled at him and got in after, staying next to him at the edge of the pool since it looked like he might fall asleep.

Valka swam over to them, and pulled her long, wavy hair over her shoulder in an attempt to restrain it. Even though Hiccup knew she was significantly younger than his father, he couldn't help but notice the streaks of white and grey in her hair.

"So how's your back doing now?" She asked.

"Better now." Replied Hiccup.

Astrid patted him on the shoulder. "I'm going to let you two talk." She said, and then swam over to join Stormfly and Toothless.

Hiccup watched her go. "So I'm guessing you plan to continue running off after this?"

Valka nodded. "I have to. Like I said, it's my job, and the trappers have only gotten bolder. I need to scare them off and keep them away from sanctuary territory."

Hiccup sighed. "I understand. Just promise you'll be careful and maybe drop by every once in a while?"

She nodded. "I promise I will, Hiccup. Don't worry. I've been in this business for quite some time. I'll be fine."

Ever since their trip to the sanctuary, Valka had made a point about coming back to the cave every morning for breakfast after the dragons had their feeding time. Each time, she would gather fish in a basket, and bring it back for Toothless to eat. Stormfly and Cloudjumper did their part too, regurgitating fish for Toothless every time they ate. Hiccup, who was getting further along in his recovery each day, had begun to do his part around the cave as well. He had finally took over as cook, which meant better meals for all of them, and Astrid had taken up watching over him and guarding the cave, sometimes even tidying up the cluttered little space.

Of course in this time, they got to know Valka's disorganized setup fairly well, along with one major issue.

"I can't find any food that doesn't have mold in it." Sighed Hiccup, looking down at the fuzzy blue and black lump that was probably once bread in contempt.

"What's the problem?" Asked Valka, looking at the morose teens as she walked in and slipped off her brown leather breastplate and bracers.

"We need more food." Said Hiccup. "I mean besides cod, venison and blackberries. Where did you get all this bread and cheese?"

"Well it depends." Said Valka, cringing at the moldy bread. "Sometimes I loot trapper shifts, but I haven't done that in a while because sometimes they carry a poisoned stash just for me." She sighed. "There's a huge trading port not far from here. It's a hot spot for traders and pirates. I suppose I can spare a few skins and shine up some old dragon scales to trade in exchange for food. Gronkle scales are a hot commodity for armor reinforcement, and bottle Nadder poison in small amounts makes for a good anesthetic. Oh, right! I can draw some maps too. Dragon trappers and hunters always want maps from me. They think I'm some sort of hunter myself, but I'd never sell dragon maps to anyone, especially them. I get my scales, venom, saliva, and so on humanely."

"Sounds like you have some haggling experience." Said Astrid. "I thought you said she never had contact with people."

Valka shrugged. "Well you can only raid so many soggy ship wrecks and weave so many baskets before visiting obscure trading posts begins to sound worth it. Now when do you two want to go? It's not that long of a flight away."

"Well, are you planning on making any breakfast first, Hiccup?" Asked Astrid.

Hiccup nodded. "Yeah, I'll just cook some fish. We can go after. I'm sure Toothless will appreciate the flight."

"Alright." Said Valka. "Come, Astrid. Help me gather things up."

Hiccup made breakfast as Astrid helped Valka gather scales and skins and bottles in a large wicker basket with a lid. They all sat down on the cave floor and ate together, finished packing, and took off, flying out away from the sanctuary to the trading post. It was the first time since leaving Berk that Hiccup had ridden Toothless, and

they were both thrilled, practicing tricks in the air, but nothing too daring, because despite everything, Hiccup's back was still healing, and Toothless was very intent to protect him. The flight only took a couple of hours, and soon they were landing in the woods next to a cluttered shanty town of a trading port. Ships of all kinds at the docks. Some Viking, others entirely different. Hiccup looked at them in awe, only able to imagine what kind of lands they might have come from.

Valka got the dragons to stay hidden under the cover of the woods. She didn't want to risk them being spotted and getting hurt. She handed Hiccup and Astrid cloaks, put one on herself, and slung one of the baskets over her shoulder. She handed Astrid the other basket, and gave Hiccup a satchel to carry.

"We don't want anyone to get too familiar with our appearances." Explained Valka, pulling the hood over her face and leading them into town.

Hiccup and Astrid followed her out of the woods, and were immediately hit with the smell of meat, incense, animal dung, and body odor. The smoky marketplace was filled with all sorts of people from all walks of life, and Valka navigated it expertly, ducking and weaving through the crowd without being noticed. Astrid and Hiccup could hardly keep up, and secretly Hiccup didn't want to. He was so engrossed in the exotic food, fine leathers, unique wares, and music, it was hard to not want to stop and look. He saw a stand that sold hand bound leather notebooks that were so beautifully crafted, and was about to go for it when Valka put her hand on his shoulder.

"It know it's all very exciting." She said. "But we have to exercise caution. Let's buy what we need first, and then I'll get us some coins and you and Astrid can treat yourselves while I pay a visit to a friend of mine."

"Friend?" Asked Astrid. "I thought you were a lonely hermit lady."

"Oh, I am for the most part. Unfortunately, you can't get everything you need without allies, especially when you're on Drago's bad side. Now come alone, we don't want to be here all day."

Hiccup continued looking more passively now as he and Astrid followed his mother around as she haggled for all sorts of different foods. Valka had a method to her shopping, going to certain merchants in a certain order, so that she would be done in no time at all and still have money left. All the merchants knew her by name, but it was clear that they knew very little about her. They all thought she was just some sort of mountain hermit woman. In fact, they were very surprised to see her being followed by a couple of disheveled teenagers, but Valka was always prepared with some vague, phony excuse for them.

"Oh, yes. I found them all by themselves so I took them in." She would say, patting Hiccup on the back just a little too hard and making him wince. "They can sure be troublemakers. You know, kids these days." And then they'd be on their way. Some rugged looking types would try to get her attention on occasion, but she would simply ignore them or tell them off. They wore dragon skins, and Valka specifically did not trade with any sort of dragon hunter.

For coins, they went to a surprisingly familiar source; a befuddled trader Johann, who looked shocked upon seeing Hiccup and Astrid.

"Master Hiccup! Goodness, I thought you hadn't made it, and miss Astrid. What are you doing here? Why, this is unfolding into an exciting course of events indeed. It reminds me or this time whenâ€" "

"Hello Johann." Said Valka.

The Trader stopped mid-sentence, and smiled awkwardly at Valka. "Oh, Valka. So good to see you, and might I say you look in excellent health as always. I promise, I haven't told a soul about you still. I might be a storyteller, but secrets are as valuable of merchandise as physical wares, and this one can't be bought. Might I say I'm relieved that Hiccup has found you. Of all people, you're the best qualified to care for him."

Valka smirked. "I'm glad to hear it. Now I just need to exchange some things for some coins. As usual, I have an exotic item to help your lips continue to be sealed." She took out a jar. "Some seashocker teeth, just for you."

Johann looked at them in amazement. "These will do perfectly. Of course, without them I still know better than to cross you. I don't want my ship to end up like the dragon trappers' forts." He went through what she had to offer, and handed her the coins to pay for it.

"So trader Johann knew about you this whole time?" Asked Hiccup as Valka handed him the coins.

She sighed. "Yes. It's such a pain to keep him quiet, but the last thing I want is a Berkian battalion storming the sanctuary. Now you two go treat yourselves, and get yourselves some food. Once you're done, meet me in that shop over there."

She motioned to a rustic little shop, painted red and covered with unfamiliar symbols.

"Alright." Said Hiccup, and he and Astrid ventured off in search of what they wanted to buy.

Valka thanked Johann and walked into the small shop, getting engulfed by steam and smoke upon entering. It was dim in there, and smelled like wet wood and heavy foreign incense. Shelves on the walls held all manner of odd objects, and behind the counter, smoking a pipe carved to look like a dragon, was one of Valka's best informants. Her name was Kai, and though she appeared to be a simple tattoo artist and herbalist, she was a rather infamous foreign pirate, known for her sticky and slippery ways of dealing with things.

The small framed woman smirked upon seeing Valka. Her maple skin glistened in the poor lighting, and her almond shaped brown eyes looked sinister yet inviting. Her black hair was tied in a bun, and her clothing was tailored in such a way as to show off the intricate tattoos on her arms and neck. It was all her work, and she was extremely talented.

"Well, well, if it isn't my favorite vigilante." Said Kai. "Come for the latest update on Drago?"

"Yes, and I have excellent compensation for you this time." Said Valka. She handed Kai a pouch containing night fury scales and a small vial of saliva. "The saliva has very effective healing properties."

Kai's cool and collected façade was instantly shattered, and she gasped in excitement. "Where did you get these?! Are these . . . are these REAL night fury scales?"

Though Kai was very good at manipulating and getting people under her thumb, she wasn't the pillaging type of pirate. No, she was a bit of a night fury enthusiast. She painted them, and admired them. She had spent years just searching for one with the hope of getting a good look at it.

"Yes." Said Valka. "I actually know one now."

Kai looked at her with wide eyes. "What do I have to do to get you to introduce me?"

"Oh well you'll have to talk to my son about that one."

"Your son huh? I thought was he was off learning to be the next chief of Berk."

"Oh no. My predictions were mistaken. He's rather small, a bean pole of a boy really. He couldn't lift an axe, so he made himself this net launching contraption, single handedly shot down a night fury with it, and realized that he couldn't kill the poor thing, so he cut him loose instead. He came back to observe him, and found out that the dragon was wounded, so he befriended him, build him a new tail, and learned to ride him. Of course, when the village found out, they exiled him, so now the two have been with me, recovering from the whole situation."

"Sounds like your son is very smart indeed. I can't wait to meet him. As for you, you wouldn't have happened to kill any trappers lately, have you?'

Valka sighed. "It was an accident. Why?"

"Well Drago has quiet the bounty on your head, dead or alive, Valka. Here, let me make you some tea while I go over the details."

End
file.